DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 329 817 CG 023 186

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TITLE Experiencing Parental Divorce during College.
PUB DATE 12 Aug 90
NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association (98th, Boston, MA, August 10-14, 1990).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adolescents; *Adult Children; Age Differences; *College Students; Coping; *Divorce; Emotional Response; Higher Education

ABSTRACT

With increasing divorce rates, many studies have addressed the effect of divorce upon the offspring of divorced and divorcing parents. Most of this research, however, deals exclusively with young children who still reside with a parent. This study examined how divorce affects older offspring, specifically those enrolled in college or graduate school at the time that their parents divorced. The subjects, a sample of seven women and seven men, aged 18-28, each participated in a semi-structured interview which addressed three aspects of the divorce experience: emotional reactions; concerns and worries; and coping strategies. Results indicated that despite their physical distance from home, college students still experienced the divorce in profound ways. Reactions such as anger and relief, and some concerns and coping strategies were similar to those of younger children. However, college students' age, maturity, and ability to assume greater responsibility added new dimensions to the divorce experience. This study, although limited by sample size, demonstrated consistent findings with other studies. The exploration of coping strategies increases knowledge for practitioners and expands the potential for future research. (ABL)

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Experiencing Parental Divorce During College

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Presented at the 98th Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association at Boston, August 1990

(Presented Sunday, August 12, 1990, 1:00 p.m.)

CG023186

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Experiencing Parental Divorce During College

Abstract

College students (N =14) were interviewed regarding their experiences with parental divorce. All of the participants were enrolled in college or graduate school at the time their parents divorced. The interviews addressed three aspects of the divorce experience: emotional reactions, concerns, and coping strategies.

This study demonstrated that despite their physical distance from home, college students still experience the divorce in profound ways. Reactions such as anger and relief, and some concerns and coping strategies are similar to those of younger children, but college students' age, maturity, and ability to assume greater responsibility add new dimensions to the experience of parental divorce.

Experiencing Parental Divorce During College

With increasing divorce rates, many studies have addressed the effect of divorce upon the offspring of divorced and divorcing parents. Most of this research, however, deals exclusively with young children who still reside with a parent. The proposed presentation concerns older offspring, specifically those enrolled in college during the initiation of parental divorce.

In general, we have limited knowledge of how divorce affects the offspring of divorcing parents, and this information comes primarily from clinical populations (e.g. Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). Although parental divorce is a stressful experience for college students, few seek the help of mental health professionals to aid in dealing with the divorce (Farber,Primavera, & Felner, 1983). Therefore, our understanding of parental divorce is particularly restricted for this group of individuals. This study sought to extend the knowledge base concerning the effects of divorce on older offspring, with an emphasis on college- age offspring's concerns and coping strategies regarding the divorce.

In recent years, several other researchers have added to the literature on parental divorce during college (e.g. Booth, Brinkerhoff, & White, 1984; Cain, 1989; Cooney, 1988; Hepworth, Ryder, & Dreyer, 1984; Moore & Hotch, 1982). Of these studies, Cain (1989) and Cooney (1988) focused their work primarily on the emotional issues college students face following parental divorce. Both studies used non-clinical samples, and relied on interview material for much of their data. While both studies emphasized the students' emotional reactions to their parents' divorce, neither work explored what students did to come to terms with the divorce. This study then, discusses students' coping strategies as well as their emotional reactions to their parents' divorces.

Method

Subjects. A community sample of seven women and seven men, aged 18-28, (mean age = 21) participated in this study. All of the participants were enrolled in college or graduate school at the time their parents divorced. The majority attended several universities and colleges in western New York State, whereas the remainder were visiting family members in the western New York State area at the time of the interviews. Participants were recruited through advertisements on campuses and in local newspapers. The parents' divorces took place within two and a half years of the date of the study.

Procedure. Subjects participated in a semi-structured interview, which covered a variety of topics related to the divorce experience. Interviews were approximately one hour long.

Analyses. The interviews were audio-taped and transcribed verbatim. The interviews were content-analyzed using techniques described by Bogdan and Biklen (1982). Categories of responses were generated from the content-analysis. The analyses generated three categories relating to aspects of the divorce experience. The first area included some of the emotional reactions to divorce. Second, the analyses suggested at least two types of concerns for the students, concerns about family members and family life, and concerns about personal matters. Finally, subjects discussed the variety of coping strategies employed to deal with the divorce.

Results

Emotional responses. Anger was the most expressed emotion for these individuals. Fifty-seven percent of the participants expressed anger with their parents for a variety of reasons, including breaking up the traditional family unit, undermining the participants' emotional support system, and being pitted by one parent against the

other. Anger is a typical reaction of offspring to parental divorce at any age (Cain, 1989; Cooney, 1988; Despert, 1962; Salk, 1978; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). However, the rationale behind the anger becomes more complex with age and with the child's heightened awareness to parental behavior and reaction to the divorce.

Beyond their initial anger, many of the participants (21%) also experienced relief from the divorce. In those situations where the divorce was anticipated, subjects were glad when it actually occured, as it removed much of the violence, abuse and other stresses of marital tension.

Despite the fact that most of the people interviewed understood the nature of their parents' relationship, 43% were shocked to learn of their parents' decison. This reaction stemmed from naiveté about the relationship, a misconception about satisfying marital relationships and appropriate couples communication, or surprise given that the participants and their families did not have other friends who were experiencing a divorce. Although Steinzor (1970) suggests that shock would be an unsusal reaction for the older child, this author's results are consistent with both Cain (1989) and Cooney (1988).

The final emotional response was a sense of loss that the participants compared to experiencing a death. Fourteen percent of the participants spoke of a sense of loss. Although family members survive, the family system and some of the familial roles did die with the divorce. subjects in the Cain (1989) study also experienced similar feelings of loss.

Concerns. Beyond initial emotional responses to the divorce, subjects also thought about their parents' divorces frequently. Concerns about family life and family matters predominated students' thoughts. Worries about parental well-being were the most frequent (71%), particularly worries about mothers. Participants also felt concern for younger siblings who remained in the home (50%). Another concern of many was

how the holidays would be spent. Thirty-six percent of the subjects worried about divided loyalties and the undoing of well-established family traditions.

Of particular poignancy were concerns about personal matters. For 50% of the participants, matters such as which residence to call "home" and how college expenses would be provided caused much anguish.

Coping strategies. In addition to the emotional responses and concerns, this study also investigated the participants' coping strategies. From the interview process, six types of coping strategies were identified. Each of the participants used an average of three of the coping strategies in managing their reactions to their parents' divorces.

Disassociating was a popular form of coping, used by 50% of the participants. In this strategy, students removed themselves from family affairs by heavily involving themselves in schoolwork, extracurricular activities, and socializing. Students had varying degrees of success with this strategy. Some excelled in campus life, whereas others lost regard for themselves to such an extent that they became physically ill or emotionally debilitated as a result of utilizing this coping strategy.

Acquiescing was actively pursued by 36% of the sample. Behaviorally, this coping strategy is similar to disassociating because students became involved in other activities, but it differs in intent. The acquiescent coper readily accepted the divorce instead of trying to forget about it.

For 86% of the students, sharing their experience or vocalizing helped them to cope. Subjects primarily talked with their friends, but they also sought the counsel of therapists, teachers, and clergy.

Not everyone felt comfortable discussing his or her home situation with others. Secretizing, or withholding information was also employed by 50% of the participants. In some circumstances, participants secretized because they were ashamed of their family situation. In other cases, participants felt that their personal situations were

irrelevant to others.

A nurturing coping strategy was often employed by those who had concerns about the rest of the family. Fifty-seven percent of the participants nurtured their families. Nurturing behaviors involved instrumental help to parents, including financial assistance, teaching parents how to cook, fix the car, or do laundry, and providing for social activities so parents would not be lonely. Providing these types of assistance helped participants worry less about their parents' well-being. Children of all ages demonstrate nuturing behavior toward their divorced parents as noted in other studies (e.g. Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). The Cain (1989) and Cooney (1988) studies as well as this study demonstrate that nurturing behavior increases in sophistication as offspring age (i.e. children teaching their mothers car maintainence).

Kinkeeping was the effort made by 28% of the participants to maintain family unity. Kinkeeping was used both as a tool to force reconciliation and as a method of improving the family relationships within the existing familiy situation when participants put themselves into the role of family negotiator either for parents or other family members.

Discussion

This study demonstrated that despite their physical distance from home, college students still experience the divorce in profound ways. Reactions such as anger and relief, and some concerns and coping strategies are similar to those of younger children, but college students' age, maturity, and ability to assume greater responsibility add new dimensions to the experience of parental divorce.

This study, although limited by sample size, demonstrates consistent findings with other studies. The exploration of coping strategies increases knowledge for practioners and expands the potential for future research.

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